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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development

Statement submitted by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The world's poorest citizens struggle every day for survival. In their efforts, they contribute in many ways to furthering the goals set at the World Summit for Social Development and the commitments made there. Through their daily lives, they are partners in the fight on poverty and in the efforts of the United Nations to further social integration and full employment. This is why the International Movement ATD Fourth World, which is a partnership between very poor families and those who work in solidarity with them, made a contribution to the Social Summit in 1995. Despite signs of progress since then, much remains to be done. ATD Fourth World has therefore made a new contribution in preparation of the upcoming General Assembly special session to review the implementation of the outcome of the social summit and to take further initiatives for action. This paper, prepared for the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, is the basis for the remarks below.

The issue of partnership with poor families and communities has gained increased attention, as witnessed during the major international conferences and summits held under the auspices of the United Nations in the last decade. The activities of the United Nations reflect the importance accorded by a growing number of people and organizations to the respect of every human being's dignity and rights, in harmony with the dignity of others — in the family, in the community, in the country and in the world. In this sense, the United Nations is progressing towards the embodiment of the credo, "We, the peoples ...".

In this light, partnership with the most destitute — millions of people throughout the world — must be understood within a perspective wider than that of having a say on matters concerning their lives. Full partnership leads to developing a "culture of overcoming extreme poverty," in which the "culture of peace" advocated by the United Nations plays a major role — with a special concern, in the decade to come, for putting the poorest children at the centre of this new culture.

> "We feel as if we don't belong to the real world. What kind of future do we have then? No work, no money, no freedom, nothing we can do. Without a job we can't envisage beginning a family. The young people I know don't want to

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have children because life is too difficult. Those who already have children ask themselves 'If things go on as they are, what kind of life will they have?'"

The young woman quoted above, a member of ATD Fourth World, expresses the alienation felt by so many of our world's poorest citizens. As globalization accelerates in many ways, the United Nations must remind the world that no one should be forgotten. For social development to succeed, we must be wary of striving to highlight success stories that leave some people out. Some individuals can benefit from short-term support to climb their way out of poverty. Others, who need a longer-term investment in their future, do succeed in taking certain steps out of poverty, but these successes can be so small as to go unnoticed by others.

In order to build the indispensable foundation for promoting a culture of peace, harmony and equal rights, as proposed by the United Nations, we need to respect the conditions necessary for building partnership with the poorest so as to empower them. Among these conditions are:

- Investing the time needed to discover the hidden realities of people's lives;
- Basing projects on the aspirations of the poorest, rather than on problems;
- Strengthening the family unit;
- Building on efforts of solidarity that already exist within a community, rather than supplanting them;
- Shaping one's knowledge together with the poorest;
- Making opportunities for the very poor to renew their creativity and contribute to cultural achievements.

Indicators of success in building a human rights based partnership with the poorest should include signs that:

- Very poor people are becoming less isolated from others;
- Their community recognizes what they have to contribute, rather than seeing them as objects of charity;
- The struggles in their past are valued, thus strengthening their ability to overcome hardship;
- They have the tools necessary to speak out in public on issues important to them;
- They have gained the strength needed to stand up for others even worse off than themselves.

Further initiatives

Not every measure can be undertaken at the same time, but public policy should indicate a strong political will to follow the compass towards the comprehensive and forward-looking approach adopted in Copenhagen.

1. Personal commitment

All people should be urged to volunteer their time and talents in the fight against poverty, through activities with governmental and non-governmental agencies, or through sharing their employment. Wherever the poorest have been condemned to feeling useless, economic autonomy must be no less of a priority than creating opportunities where they can meet people from other backgrounds in order to learn from one another and try their hands together at creative activities.

In addition, people from all walks of life should be encouraged to make a full-time commitment for periods of a few months, a year, or a few years, through non-profit organizations dedicated to overcoming poverty. The International Year of Volunteers (2001) should be an opportunity to evaluate and reinforce existing efforts in this field. This could be done in the framework of the United Nations Volunteers Programme, or through initiatives taken by Member States or by the NGO community worldwide.

2. Government leadership

In order to create consensus for a commitment to fighting poverty and to encourage individual involvement on a larger scale, Governments and intergovernmental bodies should give the necessary impetus in ways that take into account local customs and traditions:

- One such way is showing how valued these contributions in fighting poverty are. For instance, universities in Thailand provide training and monitoring to post-graduate students who work in very poor communities. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is

planning to introduce pension credits for those voluntarily providing care to the elderly and disabled. Several programmes in the United States of America reward the voluntary service commitments of young people by offering scholarships for higher education. Other programmes could include support for initiatives that encourage sharing work and cultural enrichment. They could also include support, financial and otherwise, for sabbaticals for all — including the very poor, whether they are working or out of work — to provide possibilities for learning new skills, and enlarging one's cultural and social horizons;

- Leadership is also needed to provide the necessary institutional and financial framework to support individual involvement, perhaps under the auspices of the United Nations. For instance, a recognized status could be created for those who work to eradicate poverty for a minimum of two years.

3. The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty

The International Day can be a launching point for these activities. Governments should follow the example of the Philippines which has declared this a national day for people to unite in efforts guided by the very poor themselves. In addition, in the context of the International Year for the Culture of Peace (2000), UNESCO should be entrusted with the mandate of ensuring that the poorest population groups throughout the world have significant input during the celebration of this Year, and to the proposals for follow-up. It is recommended that 17 October 2000 be dedicated to the link between constructing peace and overcoming poverty.

4. Employment policies

Employment policies should be developed together with training policies. They should offer very poor workers opportunities to secure a decent livelihood, as well as to expand their knowledge and skills in areas that prepare them for the modern labour market. If they work part-time, other forms of income for training should supplement income from work.

At the national level, Governments should launch pilot initiatives and/or support existing ones for these objectives. They also should encourage creating businesses that implement, in a sustainable way, the objectives described above. Governments alone cannot shoulder the ambition of ensuring for very poor workers access to decent livelihood and training opportunities for modern work. The business sector, trade unions and civil society must be part of these efforts.

5. Transforming unemployment

The fact that, according to International Labour Organization (ILO) figures from 1994, an additional 43 million people enter the labour market every year — 118,000 persons per day — raises the question of what will happen to those workers during periods of unemployment. The so-called "lifetime job" is disappearing. All workers face transitions between work situations. In this respect, the experiences and the thinking of the poorest workers can give us a fresh perspective on entering the labour market and on the transition between unemployment and employment. For the least-skilled workers in many countries, more often than not, periods of unemployment stretch into times of waiting, of wasting time, of deadened time. The longer such times last, the more severely they impact the possibility of re-entering the labour market. This is why time spent out of work absolutely must be shaped differently. Instead of expending all one's energies for survival, workers should have the security of a decent income to live on. Only with security are all people free to participate in cultural, social, civic, political, trade unionist or other activities. Security is necessary before the poorest can improve their skills in fields of their choice and before they can seek cultural enrichment, thus preparing themselves for participation in completely new areas of activity.

The International Labour Office has concrete data on systems of social protection and on unemployment benefits throughout the world, and provides technical support to countries in the process of installing or modernizing such systems. The ILO thus would be the appropriate agency to explore transforming periods of unemployment into periods of transition towards employment.

6. National policies and strategies for poverty eradication and social development

The Copenhagen Summit emphasized involving people who live in poverty and their organizations in the design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of these national strategies. As Governments progress in formulating the policies, they should focus sharply on gathering and taking into account the experience and views of their poorest citizens. The United Nations could also survey the expertise of grass-roots actors in civil society in order to furnish technical support for these national policies.

To ensure that the poorest can contribute to elaborating national plans, partnership is essential. At a minimum, Governments should initiate the process by including in their national plans for social development a programme for working with all citizens, including the poorest, to elaborate a more specific plan for overcoming poverty. Some national initiatives for eradicating poverty have in fact been designed through a process of partnership with all concerned, including the very poor themselves. One example is the Law Against Social Exclusion adopted in France in 1998. Another example comes from South Africa, where poverty hearings and other initiatives led to a National Poverty Forum working on the adoption of the National Programme of Action to Eradicate Poverty through implementing commitments made at the Copenhagen Summit. The South African Programme of Action is not limited to government departments; it also includes plans for poverty alleviation and eradication by non-governmental organizations, the business sector and educational and religious institutions.

7. Monitoring human rights-based development

Since Copenhagen, initiatives have been undertaken at the regional and international levels that emphasize the necessity of building schemes against poverty. The statement of commitment for action to eradicate poverty, issued in June 1998 by the executive heads of all United Nations agencies (the Administrative Committee on Coordination), summed up this emphasis well when it reaffirmed that "poverty eradication is a key international commitment and a central objective of the United Nations system".

Procedures to monitor the follow-up of these proposals have been set up, and, in this, the Commission for Social Development plays an active and central role. However, partnership with the poorest in crafting programmes for fighting poverty is not being fully monitored. It is relevant to recall the proposal made in the final report on human rights and extreme poverty (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13) adopted by the Commission on Human Rights. The report outlined that, whereas the Copenhagen Summit foresaw an appropriate machinery for the commitment on employment, i.e. the ILO, no such provision exists for the commitments on social integration and poverty eradication. This report suggested that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights be entrusted with a leading role.

An appropriate United Nations body should be empowered to further the initiatives that will come out of the special session of the General Assembly on the implementation of the Copenhagen commitments. This could also facilitate gathering expertise from different grass-roots actors in civil society, to furnish technical support for the national comprehensive policies for eradicating poverty. A specific mandate should be given to the High Commissioner for Human Rights in this framework, given the fundamental link between human rights and overcoming poverty.

8. A Convention for Overcoming Human Poverty

A working group should be set up to study the feasibility of a legally binding convention on overcoming human poverty, crafted in partnership with the people who live in deep poverty and with those committed alongside them. The idea of preparing a legally binding convention on the eradication of poverty has been brought forward by the Director-General of ILO, Juan Somavia, in order to follow through on the political commitments made at the World Summit for Social Development. The convention should not define new rights for specific groups, but rather promote a coherent, dynamic and forward-looking approach recognizing the human dignity of every human being and ensuring that all people are able to exercise their human rights. The world's most disadvantaged citizens, who have shown us that human rights are indivisible, have a key role to play in shaping this convention as a tool to further the creation of national frameworks for an overall and coherent approach towards all human rights, be they civil or political, economic, social or cultural.

Grinding poverty can be found in every country. The convention should therefore address itself to all

nations, regardless of their political, economic, social or cultural situation. The convention should also encourage all countries to share their experience and knowledge as partners in fighting poverty. The experience at the grass-roots levels among individuals and communities should inspire cooperation and solidarity between all nations to achieve the common goal of overcoming human poverty. Countries in particularly difficult situations, if they so desire, should be given access to appropriate support. Among other partners, the very poor must be associated with this work, through non-governmental organizations and the other organizations of civil society that they have chosen to represent them.

When our planet grew more aware of and sensitive to the specific conditions violating the rights of children, the Member States of the United Nations were able to adopt the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination also became tools for broadening access to justice for all. As the international community grows increasingly more sensitive to the situation of the very poorest individuals, families and communities, it deserves a tool worthy of enabling them to exercise all their fundamental rights and to assume their responsibilities.